

WALTER HICKS

A MAN WHO LOST HIS SIGHT
BUT NOT HIS VISION

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A Man Who Lost His Sight But Not His Vision

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When Walter R. Hicks was fifteen an accident left him totally blind, and, as he then thought, totally helpless—But he soon found that he had a “sixth sense,” of obstacles, and with this ray of hope set out to take his place in the world—To-day he is head of a big enterprise, and carries in his memory nearly as many facts as are kept in his files

By Lee Stowe

SOMEONE had left the door ajar. Unaware of the obstruction, a boy with heavily bandaged eyes walked falteringly toward it, almost into it! A strange sensation, one he never had felt before, made him stop. Stretching out his hand, he touched the jutting edge of the door. There was a moment's pause, a mind struck with amazement—and then a flash of exultation crossed the boyish features.

“Gee, that's great!” he said. “There's still a chance for me!”

And with that chance, that single ray of hope in a universe of things unseen, Walter Hicks began his new life at the age of fifteen. With the dawning of what he calls the “sixth sense,” of obstacles, he lost the fear of being utterly useless, which had gripped him on the first day of his total blindness.

Those who know him and his story say that Walter Hicks has something even more important than a sense of obstacles; he has a positive genius for overcoming them.

From this simple incident of a door accidentally left half-open, Walter Hicks started the fight which has made him, at the age of thirty-nine, the president of one of the largest paper-mill-supplies packing companies in America. It operates throughout the North American continent and it imports stock from half a dozen European countries.

It is a business founded upon character, chiefly upon the character of the man who, as a blinded boy with all the odds against him, had insisted that there was “still a chance.” He had lost his sight, but he refused to lose his vision.

Imagine a man, at the head of a great and complicated business, who carries in his head as many facts as would fill a card index; a man who has a mental invoice of goods and prices, of steamship rates and freight rates, of storage cost per

pound per month, of cost of packing per bale of waste—not of one grade only but of dozens of different grades!

Where his associates pause to look up prices, costs, and tonnage, Walter Hicks turns to one of the innumerable pigeon-holes of his memory, and instantly quotes what it might take them ten minutes to find in the company's books.

All day long he juggles figures as easily

much per ton and so much for thirty tons. Freight rates were rattled off at cents-and-a-fraction per pound, and the entire cost of transportation was quoted within a few seconds. In less time than you or I could have arrived at the figures on paper, Mr. Hicks was reeling off the result of his mental calculations.

“No,” he said; “we can't do it. The margin's too narrow. Tell them one thirty-five, or nothing doing!”

When I spoke to one of Mr. Hicks's stenographers about his amazing ability to carry things in his head, she replied that he seemed to remember everything.

“Why, Mr. Walter can remember things a year which most of us would forget in two weeks,” she declared. (He is known as “Mr. Walter” to the entire office force.) “He'll even remember inquiries about odd lots of goods, goods that we don't stand a chance in a hundred of ever being able to get. I remember one day we had a telegram from a buyer asking for a very scarce kind of waste. As we hadn't any on hand, and couldn't locate any, we were about to send a wire saying that we couldn't get the stuff. But Mr. Walter wasn't satisfied! He was sure that somebody had

once offered us that very grade.

“Finally, he told me to get out the files of three years before and look through the letters for the first three months, and see if there wasn't one from a certain man in Michigan offering us that very grade. I got the files, and, sure enough, there was the letter. It was the only query about that particular grade of waste that we had received in all that time.

ONE pitch-black night, when Walter Hicks was fifteen, he was pedaling his bicycle furiously down a country road, unconscious of the fact that a buggy was approaching from the opposite direction.

One Advantage That A Blind Man Has Over You

“THERE'S one way in which a blind fellow has the jump on other folks,” says Mr. Hicks, who has been blind himself since he was a boy. “If you can't see, there is just that much less to distract your mind. I've figured out stock prices and new freight rates, made up rhymes, and indulged in all sorts of mental gymnastics while I was going somewhere in the subway. If I had been able to see, a subway ad, or some other attraction, would have butted right into the middle of what I was doing.

“Ever notice a man in deep thought? Nine times out of ten his eyes are closed, or they are fixed in a blank stare on something a thousand miles away! When a man is concentrating mentally he doesn't use his physical vision.”

as a skilled entertainer keeps several balls in the air at once.

One day recently, as I was talking with Mr. Hicks in his office in New York, one of his partners came in.

“Say, Walt,” he said, “how about these No. 3 whites at one thirty-five a hundred pounds? The Jones mills will take thirty tons at one thirty a hundred on shipment three months from now. Shall we let them have it or hold for a better market?”

The alert mind behind the blinded eyes plunged into the question. Storage for three months would cost perhaps a quarter of a cent a pound, he said, making so

A few moments later, the bicycle and the buggy met with a crash, and a stabbing shaft deprived the boy of his sight.

Until that moment, he had pictured for himself graduation from Annapolis, and a life at sea. He had been a "regular boy," always eager to slip down to that fascinating place, the Brooklyn Navy Yard, not far from his home.

"Chicken" Hicks, as the sailors dubbed him, soon became a familiar figure about the yard. He got to know the officers; he pitched in with the men and swabbed down decks. When a ship was being reconditioned he wielded a paint brush or a sheet of emery paper. Finally, the lad decided to take his first trip aloft.

"Go ahead, Chick!" one of the sailors told him. "You can do it all right—only, don't look down while you're up there."

THE boy started up the rigging, went out the yard, up another course, until he reached the yard nearest the mizzen top.

A few feet from him a big Swedish sailor was at work. As if to test him, the seaman reached out, stuck his fingers into the thick curly thatch on the boy's head, and raised him until his feet swung clear of the yard upon which he had been standing. It was only a second or two before he was lowered to the yard again; but in that time he had been held out, dangling in the air, at the very top of the ship. Yet he did not utter a sound.

"You'll do, kid!" laughed the Swede. "You'll make a sailor yet."

When the boy regained the deck, he had passed one examination in seamanship. Nerve, the sailors would call it, and his mark was one hundred per cent.

But Walter Hicks was not to be a sailor. All of his self-imposed preparation came to serve a far different purpose. With the loss of his sight he was to find use for every bit of the resourcefulness, energy, and pluck he had been storing up for the sea.

"When I began to recover from the shock of becoming blind, a feeling of utter uselessness swept over me," Mr. Hicks said. "I had to fight it off. There was always that rotten alibi of 'What's the use now?' But the discovery of that sixth sense, of obstacles, which every blind man has, was like a promise of new life. From that day I never lost hope.

"In a few months I went back to school, but I was still too weak physically, and had to drop out. This meant that I must educate myself as best I could by reading and attending lectures. I learned the finger method of reading, and I mastered the touch system of typewriting.

"But I owe a lot more to my father, so

far as good reading is concerned, than I do to my own efforts. Night after night he'd come home from work and say, 'Well, Walter, what shall it be to-night?' But he was usually wise enough to pick the books himself. He chose good books too—Dickens, Thackeray, and historical works. Sometimes, on Sundays, Father would read a whole book to me. I realize now how few fathers would have had so much patience.

"By the time I was sixteen I had grown strong enough to begin to feel restless. You know how a kid is, especially if he has always been running around. I wanted something to do. My brother was with a wholesale coffee house at the time, so I hit upon the idea of selling tea and coffee in the neighborhood. My brother

addresses in my name. In the end, my customers included two hospitals, an upstate hotel, and several boarding-houses and restaurants. As I had no overhead expenses, it was not difficult to manage."

When he was seventeen, an age when most boys with eyesight are dependent upon their parents and are not over-anxious about the future, Hicks was earning \$20 a week from his sales of tea and coffee.

He kept on working, saved most of his money, and had accumulated \$5,000 by the time he was twenty-one. A couple of years later, when he gave up this business to try another field, he was earning from \$30 to \$35 a week. This was about twenty-five years ago, when even grown men thought that amount a good salary.

Yet Walter Hicks had not made a drudge of himself. He set aside a month or two of every summer for a vacation. While he was away, he paid extra help to take care of his tea and coffee deliveries. Thus the business went on, although the profits were less.

THE place where Hicks forgot his business affairs—and his blindness as well—was Shelter Island, near Long Island, New York. A group of college men played baseball there every summer. Before his misfortune, young Hicks had snapped up grounders with a zest. Now he sat on the bench with the players, and some of the subs kept him posted as to who was "on" and who was "up." The crack of a hard-hit ball always brought him to his feet. His enthusiasm resulted in his appointment as

manager of the team, and he served in this capacity for several summers.

There were also swimming and tennis matches on Shelter Island, and the fellow to put them over always seemed to be "Walt" Hicks. At the end of the season he also became a leader in the production of the annual show, for which he wrote several original songs, supplying both the words and the music.

"My association with college fellows during my vacations struck home on one point," Mr. Hicks said. "It made me realize how much I lacked educationally. As a result, I went to a school for the blind when I was twenty-one and stayed there a year. I didn't stay longer, because I wanted something different. I didn't want to learn the typical occupations of the blind. I didn't want even to think of myself as blind! And it is a fact that I don't. For that matter, I doubt if my friends think about my blindness. They don't seem to, so far as I can tell."

From a close friend of Mr. Hicks I heard of an incident which occurred at this school. It (Continued on page 108)



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Walter R. Hicks, president of Daniel M. Hicks, Inc., of New York, handlers of waste, has been blind since his boyhood; but, despite that handicap, he has acquired an education and has risen steadily in the business world. Before he was twenty-one, Mr. Hicks had saved five thousand dollars out of a coffee and tea trade which he himself had established. Later he entered the paper mill supply firm of which he is now the head. Mr. Hicks, whose home is in Brooklyn, is married and has three children

arranged to get a few pounds at reduced rates to launch the venture.

"Just then I wasn't any great shakes at traveling alone, so I hired a boy to go with me while I drummed up my first orders. I did the talking and he wrote down the orders. The same boy attended to deliveries. By the time the week was over I had enough on the books to pay the boy for making the deliveries, and still to leave me a fair balance.

THE retail line went so well that I decided to take a fling at selling wholesale. I mustered up every selling point I could think of, and got my helper to take me to a restaurant not far from home. The owner agreed to give my line a trial, and later he became a regular customer.

"After a while I was able to find my way alone on some of the routes close at home, but I always had to hire somebody to go with me on the longer ones.

"The packer with whom I dealt shipped in cases and cartons. All I had to do was to transmit my orders to him and they would be consigned to the proper



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was one of the most remarkable boyhood fights I have ever heard about, the fight of a boy without a particle of vision against another who, though impaired in sight, could see well enough to read with the aid of glasses.

The partially sighted youth had adopted a condescending manner toward young Hicks, calling him "kid" with offensive emphasis. He had been requested not to repeat his offense, but had persisted. When provocation became too great, the "kid" shouted warning and struck out in the direction of the other's voice. Some of the blows landed. Many more did not. But enough took effect to drive the overbearing young man from the room, leaving Hicks somewhat shaken up but indisputably *not* a kid. Afterward, his adversary came around, shook hands, and the two became very good friends.

That fight had two marked results: It gained for Hicks the decided respect of his companions and it gave him confidence in his ability to look out for himself.

"I guess that's all the fireworks I had," Mr. Hicks added, with a laugh, after he had acknowledged the truth of the incident. "But I learned that you've got to stand on your own feet wherever you are."

"What became of the tea and coffee business while you were at school?"

"I tried to develop it into a self-supporting proposition for the blind throughout the country. About a year after I entered the school, I put the scheme up to the representatives of various associations for the blind. I outlined my retail business and my plan for its general application. It looked good to everyone I talked to, so I sent out several hundred letters to prospective blind salesmen.

"FROM the way the letters came in, I thought I was going to be a J. P. Morgan. I was swamped with them, and had to give up school to devote all my time to developing this new phase of my business. But within a year the experiment proved to be a bubble. Most of the blind didn't have cash, and I failed to find any adequate method for providing credit. So I gave up the idea."

Mr. Hicks paused to take a cigar from a box at his elbow, struck a match, and applied it to the end of the cigar as if he could see the very spot.

"While working on the coffee-selling scheme for the blind," he went on, "I got up a booklet on salesmanship. Not that I knew much about it, but I did believe I understood the fundamentals. I took this booklet to the New York Association for the Blind, and they asked me to give a lecture to the members. From this, I got to writing salesmanship and general business letters. One day my father showed some of these to a friend.

"Why don't you take him in your own business?" the friend asked.

"Father thought it over and decided to take a chance—or at least to give me one—and that's how I started to make a living out of rags and waste paper.

"I was absolutely green in a general business way when I came in. I started by taking dictation, answering the telephone, and the like. I wasn't acquainted with the trade terms, the market, or anything else. To be in business and in contact with people on such a scale was a new experience, but I liked it.

"Father had a fine reputation and he knew his business thoroughly. It was a very good school for me. I started at fifteen dollars a week. I still kept my coffee sales agency, which netted me more than I received in the office. I bought an interest in the business to start with; then, about a year later, I had money on the outside that wasn't doing anything, so I put that in.

"IN ONE respect, I was fortunate. My memory served me well. I used to listen in on Father's conversations and take mental notes of prices and grades. I remembered what I heard; and when Father would ask me whether we had any of a particular stock on hand, I usually could tell him without looking it up. Once I sold a fifty-ton lot of a grade Father had forgotten we had. I made it a point to keep a mental invoice of such matters. It wasn't so much that I was more alert but that, being blind, I had to remember!

"I was twenty-four when I was transplanted to Father's office. I had been in the coffee game just about eight years. After that it died out gradually, though I made quite a little from it on the side for some time. When I changed business, I usually went to the office and home again with my father or my brothers; so that now I'm all out of practice when it comes to cruising alone.

"I'd like to say a good word for the hundreds and thousands of friends a blind man finds while tapping his way about New York. You've no idea how many folks lend us a hand.

"I used to take surface cars frequently from Brooklyn Bridge. The different tracks come in there, a dozen or more of them, and two or three lines use each track. You can imagine a blind man's fix trying to get the right car. Yet I've scarcely ever had to stand there, even a few minutes, before someone would come over and offer to watch for my car.

"Occasionally I bumped into strange experiences traveling alone. One time I was on a trolley car when a drunk came over, sat beside me, and asked where I wanted to go. I told him politely that I knew the way, but he insisted. 'Shh nothin' at all, old chap! Jussh let me show you!'

"When I left the car he got off with me; and he stuck with me down the street. I couldn't shake him off. Finally, when I reached my gate, I sang out, 'So long. Much obliged.' 'Shh all right!' he declared. 'Shh all right.' And he started back to get another trolley car."

The business started by the elder Hicks has been increased more than four times

within a few years by his son. For example, rags are bought in carload lots from packers and collectors, and in turn are sold in lots to supply customers. The firm packs all of its own waste paper and specializes in that. Among the imports handled by Daniel M. Hicks, Inc., are flax, jute, rags, cotton, linen, sisal (a Yucatan fiber), hemp, silk, and wool wastes.

"It was in 1909 that I came into the business," said Mr. Hicks. "When we were incorporated, a few years later, I was elected vice president, and became president in 1919 after my father's death.

"In addition to our regular staff of men working in this country, we have a man go abroad every year and cover Great Britain and Europe. You can strip a man from head to foot, reduce his clothing to raw material, and send practically every part of it back to various industries of this country. Take a man's hat; it goes back into a hat again and the sweatband is used for fertilizer. The necktie, if silk, may be reduced to spinning again. The lining of the clothes goes to paper manufacturing. The coat can be shoddied or carbonized; it goes back and can be spun with virgin wool again. It all proves there's a commercial use for everything."

I ASKED Mr. Hicks if the loss of his sight had helped him.

"Yes and no," he said. "Blindness may be a partial handicap to a man. He's got something to overcome, and he realizes he must work harder. For that reason *he aims above the mark in order to hit it*. But his effort to overcome the handicap will bring him further along than if he worked under advantageous conditions.

"If eyesight were a guarantee of achievement, every man with sight would be a wonder. But there's always a plus or a minus. If a man has eyesight, he may lack something else. There are things which are more important than eyesight; for instance, the ability to do a thing thoroughly! A blind man may carry his talents further, being blind, than he would have done unhandicapped.

"The trouble with too many blind folks is that they feel sorry for themselves, and they don't cultivate outside interests. I've told any number of blind friends, 'Get out and do something! Meet people and make friends. Don't wait for them to come to you.'

"When I first became blind it was such a shock I felt completely useless for days. But after that 'sixth sense,' of

obstacles came, it wore off. And when I began to walk out by myself after the accident, the sensation of adventure and exploration increased. Why, I used to feel like Christopher Columbus every time I crossed the street!"

I asked Mr. Hicks whether he ever had seen his wife, and he told me that he had not. It was some time after his early adventures at making a living that he met her. And, of course, he never has seen their three children.

"IT IS curious," he said, "how children realize, without anyone telling them, that a person is blind. I used to read my boy nursery rhymes when he was small. I knew the rhymes, and my trick was to have him tell me what the picture was, then I could say the rhymes.

"One night I opened the book with him, but he couldn't seem to make me understand what the picture was. At last he said, 'They're all fallin' down, Daddy! They're all fallin' down!' I said 'Oh, yes!' and turned the book around. When I had it right side up he said, 'It's all right now, Daddy. Go ahead!'

"Whenever I carried him up-stairs on my shoulders, as I used to do every night, he would guide me by saying, 'Look out, Daddy! There's a chair.' Or, 'There's the telephone.'

"But, after all, in many ways I don't realize myself that I'm blind. When I went to Niagara Falls, I *listened* to them! And I can't believe that I haven't *seen* Niagara Falls. I have a mental picture of the cataract, just as I have of the people I meet in business or pleasure, just as I have of you. Maybe it flatters you and maybe it doesn't; but at any rate it's what you look like in my mind.

"It's foolish for a fellow who has lost his sight to think what he would do if he got it back," Mr. Hicks says. "Or what he would want most to see, if his sight should come back for only a short time.

"Probably if he did regain his vision, everything would be confusion at first. His sense of distance would be all askew. He couldn't 'hear' a wall, or a tree, from the echo of his cane. The wall would look too near or too far away, and he'd be afraid of bumping into it.

"It's hard to say what I'd do first, or want to see first, if I did get back my sight. I wouldn't pick up a book, that's a cinch! I'd want to get outdoors somewhere—chase a fly ball, or romp with my youngsters—anything where I could use my sight to hop into something which I can't do without it."

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